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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PORT AU PRINCE 001575

SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR WHA/EX, WHA/CAR,
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SUBJECT: HAITI SCHOOL COLLAPSE: NO SHORTAGE OF BLAME

REF: PORT AU PRINCE 1572

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Rescue teams have transitioned from rescue work to recovery of bodies buried in debris after the collapse November 7 of a primary and secondary school in Port au Prince. As Haitian officials begin the blame game, prosecutors have already arrested the director of the school and questioned several other officials. The tragedy highlights state negligence in the face of the dilapidated or inadequately built structures housing schoolchildren. End summary.

School Building Collapses

¶2. (U) Haiti's Office of Civil Protection (DPC) put the death toll as of November 11 at 89 persons, although the death toll is expected to be closer to 100 as the recovery of victims continues. As of November 12, DPC stated that 73 bodies had been identified. The victims were primarily children, who perished when the building housing College la Promesse Evangelique, a 3-story kindergarten through grade twelve school in the Nerettes neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, collapsed November 7 at 1000 local time. The school was a multi-story structure built on the side of a steep ravine inside of a warren of narrow alleys and dense slum housing (reftel). One hundred fifty persons were injured -- many severely -- and were taken to area hospitals where they were treated by Haitian physicians, and by physicians with Doctors without Borders/Belgium and DWB/France.

¶3. (U) Doctors at Haiti's largest hospital, the State University Hospital of Haiti (Hopital de l'Universite d'Etat d'Haiti), quickly suspended a strike they have waged for over a month to protest salary arrears, working conditions, and inadequate supplies, equipment, and facilities. Medical staff prepared emergency surgery facilities and medical residents provided updates via radio on the status of those treated and released. By November 12, however, these doctors had resumed their strike.

Swift Response, but Daunting

¶4. (SBU) USAID/OFDA Representative reports (reftel) that search and rescue efforts reflect good coordination and collaboration among Haitian, U.S., French and MINUSTAH personnel. Late November 11, news media reported that the search for survivors ended but that clearing the remaining rubble and recovering bodies will continue. President Preval commended the Red Cross, the Haitian National Police and American and French search and rescue personnel for their efforts. (Note: Members of the Fairfax County Urban Search and Rescue team arrived November 8 to work with the USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team already in Haiti; a team of French rescue firefighters from Martinique arrived the

evening of November 7. End note) The press announced November 12 that the government is setting up an inter-ministerial committee to aid victims of the disaster and their families.

Placing Blame

¶5. (SBU) President Rene Preval arrived at the scene of the catastrophe within hours and was joined by Prime Minister Michele Pierre-Louis, the Ministers of Education, Health and Youth. Preval has since returned to the site two times. In his first visit, the President blamed the school collapse on faulty building construction. He added that continual political instability has contributed to a lack of respect for the law and created an environment where haphazard and unsafe construction is common. "Anarchic" construction was also to blame, Preval said, for blocking the path of rescue vehicles heading to the school to assist victims. He warned that many other cities, including Carrefour (near Port-au-Prince) and Gonaives (affected by floods) were of concern. Former Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis also visited the site November 8.

¶6. (SBU) Minister of Youth and Sports Evens Lescouffleur was designated the lead GOH official for the disaster and remained on-site through much of the rescue/recovery operations. Minister of Education Joel Desrosiers Jean Pierre visited the school site several times and promised to 'take charge' of surviving students. He also promised the MOE would create a commission charged with verifying the safety of buildings housing educational institutions. He warned that the MOE was

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ready to temporarily close establishments that do not meet certain security criteria.

¶7. (SBU) Senate President Kely Bastien angrily called for the arrest of the proprietor of the school, Pastor Fortin Augustin, and called for the formation of a special commission to investigate the tragedy. Augustin, who allegedly personally supervised the construction, was arrested by police, questioned by a magistrate, and charged with involuntary manslaughter. Press reported that Minister of Education Desrosiers will testify before the Senate November 12.

¶8. (SBU) President of the Senate Commission on Education Yvon Buissereth denounced the country's negligence which caused the tragedy and announced that his Commission would convoke Ministers to testify and discuss actions necessary to avoid further catastrophes.

¶9. (SBU) Mayor of Petion Ville Claire Lydie Parent arrived on the scene soon after the catastrophe, saying she prohibited further construction on the building during her first mayoral mandate 8 years ago when the building was only one-story high. She said city engineers found the building was not structurally sound. Parent vowed to stop haphazard construction in her jurisdiction. Some reports questioned how the proprietor was instead able to build a second story and later a third story under the Mayor's current tenure. It is not yet confirmed whether construction of the third story contributed to the building's collapse. (Comment: Parent is considered 'tough' on matters of urban planning. She has followed through on promises to move open markets that blocked streets and created transportation bottlenecks, and ordered building owners to move walls and other obstructions that block sidewalks and create hazards for pedestrians and drivers. End comment)

Legal Investigations Underway

¶10. (SBU) Newly appointed Minister of Justice and Public Security Jean Joseph Exhume also visited the site as soon as

he was installed in office November 10, and promised to investigate legal responsibility. The Director of the school, Augustin Fortin, has been arrested and charged with involuntary manslaughter. Prosecutors have questioned three officials of the Ministry of Education and Petion-Ville Mayor Parent.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Press commentary on the tragedy echoes the universal complaint against the Haitian state, that it fails to live up to the most elementary responsibility of insuring citizens' safety. The ''La Promesse Evangelique'' (The Evangelical Promise) school is the tip of the iceberg of private schools -- and many other buildings -- throughout the country built with no regard for building codes, which exist but are rarely enforced. Legal investigation and possibly prosecutions will continue, but the wave of political accusations is hardly likely to shock the Haitian state out of its congenital laxity toward the welfare of schoolchildren and other citizens.

SANDERSON